

VZCZCXRO1567
PP RUEHPT
DE RUEHBY #1244 3440613
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 090613Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY CANBERRA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0642
INFO RUEHBN/AMCONSUL MELBOURNE PRIORITY 5819
RUEHPT/AMCONSUL PERTH PRIORITY 4091
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY PRIORITY 4029
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

UNCLAS CANBERRA 001244

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [AS](#)
SUBJECT: POLLING GETS WORSE FOR LIBERAL PARTY

REF: A) CANBERRA 1206 B) CANBERRA 1222

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: A Newspann released December 9 indicates that the Opposition is going backwards since it switched leaders to Malcolm Turnbull in September. Support for the Coalition is at its lowest level since June. Since the last Newspann two weeks ago, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) has introduced its comprehensive workplace relations bill (further winding back the Howard government's unpopular laws). In addition, Shadow Treasurer Julie Bishop has been under fire from the media, the Coalition appears split and disorganized, and the Government has vigorously promoted its economic stimulus package, which will be delivered this week. The economy is the number one political issue currently and the voters appear satisfied with Rudd's handling of it. END SUMMARY.

WORSE THAN NELSON

¶2. (U) The Newspann, conducted December 5-7, has the ALP extending its two-party preferred lead by 8 points to 59-41. Rudd has increased his lead over Malcolm Turnbull as preferred Prime Minister to 47 points (66-19). The last Newspann conducted when Brendan Nelson led the Coalition had the ALP leading 55-45, and Nelson trailing by 46 points as preferred PM. Rudd's satisfaction rating, at 70 percent, has risen to the second highest on record.

WHY A SURGE FOR RUDD?

¶3. (SBU) PM Rudd has benefited politically from a number of factors. The economy is dominating political debate, particularly the government's efforts to address the global financial crisis (ref A). Turnbull's attack on Rudd's performance has been undermined by media speculation, some of it fed by Liberal MPs, about Julie Bishop's handling of the Shadow Treasurer's job. The ALP introduced its substantial and centrist industrial relations bill, using it as an opportunity to remind voters of the Howard government's unpopular WorkChoices laws and drawing attention to the Liberals' division on the extent to which they should support the ALP's rollback (ref B). At the end of this year's last parliamentary session on December 4, six Coalition Senators (including four Nationals) voted against the Coalition, and many abstained, when their leadership changed its initial opposition and decided to support the Government's infrastructure bill. This caused tension within the Coalition between Liberals and Nationals, and several Coalition Senators publicly admitted confusion over their side's Senate tactics. The Government has been heavily promoting its economic stimulus package - especially the \$8.6 billion in payments that will be made to pensioners, carers and parents this week.

LIBERALS CALL FOR UNITY

¶4. (U) Some Liberals attributed the ALP's poll surge to the

Government's economic stimulus payments issued this week, however others conceded that perceived disunity in the Coalition was a factor. Key Liberal leader and tactician Andrew Robb said "the emergence of disunity within the coalition is working strongly against us." Turnbull said "disunity is not a good look politically," and even former leader Nelson, who Turnbull replaced, urged the Liberals to "get behind Malcolm."

15. (SBU) COMMENT: The ALP and Rudd have comfortably won every Newspann since the election just about a year ago. There was a dip in Rudd's popularity when he was criticized for cutting back payments to the elderly and when the media turned on him over a perceived lack of a "big picture" agenda. The global financial crisis, however, has given his government direction and the chance for Rudd to look like a leader. Although Rudd Qand the chance for Rudd to look like a leader. Although Rudd is regularly criticized for his wooden and overly intellectual speaking style, the voters appear to be comfortable with him. This latest poll is a wake-up call for the Liberals that they can ill-afford a repeat of the disunity of the 1980s, and confirmation that they have made little headway in 2008 against Rudd.

MCCALLUM